DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 225 CE 079 972

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TITLE	Using Communication To Retain Tutors. Action Research Monograph.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Action Research Monographs. Complete Set. Pennsylvania Action Research Network, 1998-99. Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education. A Learning from Practice Project; see CE 079 962.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Action Research; Adult Basic Education; Adult Educators; Adult Literacy; Attitudes; Comparative Analysis; Dropout Research; *Dropouts; Intervention; *Labor Turnover; *Literacy Education; *Outreach Programs; Postsecondary Education; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; Questionnaires; *Staff Development; Teacher Persistence; Teacher Researchers; Trend Analysis; *Tutors; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS	Pennsylvania; 353 Project

ABSTRACT

Many volunteer literacy tutors in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, have not completed their 1-year tutoring commitment. Consequently, an action research project was undertaken to determine the causes of the high tutor turnover and to identify ways of improving the tutor retention rate. All tutors involved in the program from 1998 onward were asked to complete a questionnaire listing 21 reasons that might make tutors quit tutoring. The project goal was to boost the retention of tutors trained in 1999 to 70%. All 37 tutors asked to complete questionnaires did so. Eighty percent of tutors who completed the questionnaire responded positively to the seven questionnaire items related to the need for further communication between tutors and members of the literacy council's staff. As a result, the tutor training program was revised and office staff worked to adopt the approach of active listening when dealing with tutors and to increase communication with tutors. Although the retention rate of tutors trained in 1998 was only about 40-60 percent, 100% of the tutors trained in January 1999 were still tutoring in May 1999 (the end of the action research project). (The tutor questionnaire is appended.) (MN)

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PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Special Project

A Learning From Practice Project

Action Research Monograph

ED 440 225

PENNSYLVANIA ACTION RESEARCH NETWORK
1998-99

Monograph Title:

Using Communication to Retain Tutors

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Pennsylvania Department of Education,
Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education

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CE 079972

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PRODUCT

"Pennsylvania Action Research Network:
Staff Development Through
Six Professional Development Centers"

Project Number 099-99-9010
July 1998-June 1999

Project Director
Dr. Gary Kuhne
Assistant Professor and Regional Director of Adult Education
The Pennsylvania State University

Note: Action Research is a process of systematic inquiry credited to Kurt Lewin who popularized it in the U.S. in the 1940"s. Today it is considered a system of qualitative research. Typical of action research, none of the individual projects in this monograph series claims to have generalizable application beyond the specific project described. However, each monograph report can serve to be illustrative, instructive and provides the potential for replication in other locations. For a level of generalizability, it is recommended that the reader seek common patterns in the monograph reports in this series, and the wider literature, or contact the Action Research Network for assistance in this.

I. ABSTRACT

Franklin County Literacy Council has had an ongoing problem of the retention of tutors. Many tutors have not been able to complete their one-year commitment. This study compared retention rates for tutors from 1998 to the present time. A question and response form was developed to determine the reasons for tutor dropout. Results were collected by phone or personal visit. The tutors that responded felt that in the past there had been a lack of contact and communication between the tutor and the program itself. With increased communication tutor retention could improve.

II. PROBLEM

Volunteer tutors are difficult to retain. Therefore, as learning sessions continue, the students are deprived of continuing contact with the same tutor.

Students range in age from seventeen and older, with most of the students being female. Varied socio-economical levels are noted. ABE students range in ability from pre-literate through beginning, intermediate, and those requiring specific ABE training. ESL students range through pre-beginning, beginning and intermediate.

The 13-year-old literacy council has had difficulties in the past, which include funding, adequate staffing, and continuity in support staff

Retention of tutors could positively effect student outcomes because of instructional continuity.

III. PLANNING

The intervention plan was to compare tutors trained in 1998 and those trained in 1999 when tutor communication was increased.

A questionnaire (attached) was utilized to interview tutors from 1998. The tutors were given a list of 21 different responses to the question of "What is/or would be a reason that you did/or would stop tutoring." The responses to the question were obtained by telephone contact and in person by the researcher.

The baseline or criteria for success was set at a high of 70% tutor retention rate, for tutors trained in January/February, 1999.

Constraints against using work-time for this project were more than overcome by volunteer hours to the agency.

Approval for this project was obtained by Barbara Noel, Program Coordinator and also Henry Wardrop, Special Projects Coordinator.

In reviewing the literature it appears that recruitment and retention are used interchangeably. These are clearly related issues, although retention becomes the outcome of recruitment.

In this literacy office it has become evident that retention is affected by communication and contact with the literacy staff

Will the implementation of past tutors suggestions received by survey results increase tutor retention to 70% for the first six weeks of 1999?

IV. ACTION

Implementing the intervention was easier than anticipated. As tutors came to the literacy council office or were contacted by phone, the tutors were receptive to responding to the question.

The researcher would verbalize the 21 responses to the tutor, therefore making this instrument user-friendly for the tutor.

Thirty-seven tutors responded to the questionnaire. There were no refusals or constraints, due in part to the familiarity of the tutor with the researcher.

V. RESULTS

Of the thirty-seven tutors that responded, 80% of the tutors responded in a positive way to questions #5,7,9,13,15, 17, and 18. These responses were all related to the need for further communication between tutor and a staff member of the literacy council. As demonstrated by the graph, this project improved retention when contact and communication were instituted in January 1999.

VI. REFLECTION

This approach of active listening and caring by the office staff to the tutors, certainly supports tutor retention. In our literacy council we will continue this approach in hopes of retaining tutors. Tutor contacts will be made on an ongoing basis.

QUESTION and RESPONSES

What is/or would be a reason that you did/or would stop tutoring?

1. Schedule conflict and lack of time to commit to to at least two to three hours per week.

2. Needed faster and more communication by staff member after tutor training, then realized that they did not have that much time to commitment .

3. Lack of student commitment and failure to call when unable to meet sessions. I get discouraged when this happens for it is a waste of my time.

4. Lack of time.

5. Lack of feedback and communication with staff of the agency. More local workshops to keep us abreast to new and more effective way of helping the students.

6. After tutoring for a number of years there was a lack of communication with the staff members.

7. Lack of correspondences with staff and no future updated training.

8. Someone to be used as a mentor to sit in on first one or two tutor sessions.

9. Lack of communication with staff and trainers.

10. Just not ready to tutor at this time.

11. More of a time commitment than I thought when I decided to take the training.

12. Students that are not dedicated to learning .

13. Lack of communication and help from staff members.

14. The thing that would help in keeping tutors would be more training whether it be more as an advanced tutor training classes or regular workshops dealing with new methods of teaching the adult learner.

15. The one thing that would cause me to quit tutoring would be the lack of feedback and support from the staff.

16. Having past tutors speak at a gathering designed to encourage people to become tutors.

17. Regular feedback from staff members

18. Monthly feedback from staff members and more tutor training or, if feasible a workshop

19. One of the most important reasons why I would quit tutoring would be a lack of support and information from the staff at FCLC . Tutor training refresher sessions would be useful if possible.

20. Two to three months after training have a session with tutors, staff, and trainer to discuss questions, problems, and needs that tutors may be experiencing after they start tutoring.

21. Family commitments.